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ABSTRACT

Previous writers have presumed that widowhood is more stressful for one sex or the other. Hypotheses derived from demographic considerations and sex role developmental theory compared the needs and resources of 147 widows and 42 widowers, relative to 190 married persons. All subjects were non-institutionalized urban residents aged 62 or over. The interview results indicate that: (1) sex differences are greater in widowhood than in marriage; (2) men are favored in marriage but endure greater hardship as widowers; and (3) sex differences in widowhood are most pronounced in psychosocial functioning, nutrition and household needs. (Author)

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# Sex Differences in the Experience of Widowhood[1]

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Several authors in the field of widowhood have presumed that the experience is acutely stressful to members of one sex, above and beyond its impact in the other. Berardo (1970) contends that widowers are ultimately worse off, a position echoed in the reports of investigations of suicide (MacMahon & Pugh, 1965; Bock & Webber, 1972) and alcoholism (Bailey, Haberman, & Alksne, 1965) among elderly men, which is also consistent with some studies of general mortality among the widowed (Rees & Lutkins, 1967; Parkes, Benjamin, & Fitzgerald, 1969; Young & Wallis, 1963). On the other hand, the view that widowhood is particularly hazardous to women has been offered (e.g., Lewis & Berns, 1975). This position is consistent with historical and sociological analyses of the reduced social options available to single women (Adams, 1971; Lopata, 1975).

Unfortunately, previous investigators have rarely evaluated these competing hypotheses with the comprehensive study of comparable groups of widows and widowers, relative to married controls. Their interests, theoretical considerations, and the relative unavailability of widowers

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[1]The term widowhood in this paper applies to both widows and widowers.

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have often led them to the exclusive study of members of one sex. Substantive data bearing on the issue might be available in two other sources: comprehensive surveys of the aged, or investigations of personality and lifestyle changes in both sexes across the life span (Lowenthal, Thurnher & Chiriboga, 1976; Mass & Kuypers, 1975; Neugarten, 1972). However, most such studies have sought to identify general age trends, and have not been particularly sensitive both to differences between marital status groups and to the particular experiences common in bereaved persons. (An exceptional study in this regard is that of Pihlblad, Adams & Rosencranz, 1972, but the data base is limited to socioeconomic information.)

The issue is important for a number of reasons. Substantive sex differences in the experience of widowhood would have direct implications not only for the provision of adequate social and health services to the widowed, but would be especially salient in preventive mental health programming for the married (Barrett, 1978). Sex differences in widowhood would be relevant to the increasing refinement in the formulation of sex role development across the lifespan, which historically has relied on a marriage model. Finally, the operation of uninformed biases about widowed individuals inhibits professional work with older persons in a teaching, research or service context.

Of the limited research empirically examining sex differences in the experience of widowhood, only one study (Carey, 1977) found substantial relative advantages for widowed men. Three (including one review article) concluded that widowed women endure a less stressful existence (Gove, 1972; Berardo, 1967; Pihlblad & Adams, 1972). One reported few differences (Petrowsky, 1976), while a final study attributed most of the variance to demographic characteristics unevenly distributed in the two gender groups (Atchley, 1975).

In the absence of additional empirical data, predictions about sex differences in the experience of widowhood can be derived in at least two ways: from an understanding of demographic differences between widows and widowers, and from extrapolations of current sex role theory. Widows outnumber widowers by at least four to one (Barrett, 1976), and are younger as a group. These facts imply that widowed women are more likely to have same-sex widowed friends both prior to and during their own widowhood, who may serve as role models and offer a social support network. On the other hand, the option to remarry is far more accessible to widowed men. Traditional sex role socialization implies unique hazards for each sex, despite the common stresses they endure in widowhood.

## METHOD

A representative sample of 403 community residents aged 62 and over were interviewed in an extensive needs assessment survey of the elderly in a large midwestern city. The sample constituted one and a half percent of all non-institutionalized persons meeting the age criterion who resided in each census tract of the city. When the number of subjects per tract had been determined, block numbers were randomly selected from each tract for the actual interviews, omitting those with residential institutions. For the present study, divorced and never married individuals were excluded, leaving 137 widows, 42 widowers, 87 wives, and 103 husbands. The size of the total sample for this study was 379.

Data were obtained in six major areas of life functioning; these were psycho-social needs, household roles, nutrition, health care, transportation and education. The interview schedule is published in Hays & Hays (1976). Altogether 138 dependent variables were available with sufficient

variance for analysis. Psycho-social data included the entire Philadelphia Geriatric Center morale scale (Lawton, 1973), age perception, orientation to the future, presence of a confidant and desire for one, degree of contact with children, extent of participation in work, volunteer, religious and organizational roles, and desire to discuss eight emotional or social themes.

Potential sex differences in the widowed sample were systematically tested using analyses of variance or chi-square tests of association as appropriate. Similarly, potential differences between the married women and men were systematically tested for all areas of life functioning. The differences which occurred were then evaluated with respect to which sex was the more "favored", using the criterion of greater resources or less expressed need.

## RESULTS

The data analyses revealed that wives and husbands differed significantly on 11.6 percent of the assessed variables, whereas widows and widowers differed significantly on 23.9 percent of these same variables. There is little consistency in the sex differences which appear in the two samples (see Table 1). A number of differences in the marrieds disappear in the bereaved group (see Table 2), and a host of others emerge (see Table 3). The number of sex differences is greater in widowhood in each of the six major areas of life functioning except transportation needs and resources, and differences are particularly pronounced in the areas of psycho-social functioning, household roles and nutrition.

Differences between married women and men favor the husbands twice as often as the wives. However, the vast majority (85%) of the differences

between widowed women and men favor the widows. Widowers are more likely than their female counterparts to experience low morale, to feel lonely and dissatisfied with life, to evaluate a variety of community services as inadequate, to need help with household responsibilities, to have difficulty obtaining necessary medical appointments, to eat poorly, and to experience negative attitudes toward their own continued learning. They are also less likely than widows to want a confidant or to want to talk about widowhood or death.

The widows and widowers in this sample also differed significantly on five demographic variables. The widowers had more children, were older, less well educated, more likely to be retired, and more likely to be members of an ethnic minority group. For this reason, sex differences were reanalyzed using a partial correlation precedure to control for the effects of these variables (Nunnally, 1975). The results (see Table 4) indicate that five dependent variables were no longer significantly different, but nine additional variables were, reducing the percentage of results favoring the widows to 76 percent.

The same partial correlation procedure was applied to the married sample, even though husbands and wives differed demographically in only two ways. The husbands were also older and more likely to be retired. This secondary analysis resulted in the loss of only one significant relationship, and nine others again emerged, the majority of which still favored the men (see Table 5).

## DISCUSSION

This study found sex differences in life functioning among both married and widowed aging samples. The fact that substantially more

than five percent of the variables examined reflect sex differences argues for their credibility, as do the results of the secondary data analyses controlling for demographic differences. Sex differences were more numerous in the widowed sample, and almost always favored the women. With the contrasting data available in the married sample, it is apparent that the differences found were not a result of general trends for older women and men. Rather, the experience of widowhood led to unique differences between the sexes.

The results of the present study are consistent with Bernard's (1972) conclusion that marriage is more oppressive to women than to men, even in maturity. But they suggest that widowhood is more oppressive to men than to women. This should not alleviate our concern for widows; both the data in this study and numerous other studies substantiate the fact that widows fare worse than wives (Barrett, 1977; O'Leary, in press). Rather, it should raise our concern about elderly widowers. Their relative disinterest in discussing their own situation is likely to be an obstacle in social services and other "treatment" paradigms. A better alternative may be the evolution of responsive preventive intervention strategies prior to the deaths of their wives. A number of the differential problems of widowers lend themselves to a sex role interpretation. Reciprocal training in household roles and skills relevant to single lifestyles could be implemented with both married men and women.

A limitation of the current study is that it is cross-sectional in design, although all subjects reside in the same community. The preponderance of widowed persons are themselves over 62; hence the age range in this sample is appropriate to an understanding of sex differences in the widowed

population. However, younger samples also merit study, particularly in light of age differences in the experience of widowhood which are increasingly becoming apparent (Heyman & Gianturco, 1973; Barrett & Snyder, 1975; Wyly & Hulicka, 1975; Parkes, 1972; Clayton, 1974). Studies using a wider age range could more thoroughly address the predictions about sex differences in widowhood derived from the characteristic proportion of widows and widowers at various age levels.

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Table 1: Significant Sex Differences Common to Married and Widowed Samples

| Variable | Group Favored |
|---|---|
| Believe nutrition information would help | F |
| Need help with small repairs | M |
| Feel safe walking after dark | M |
| Church attendance | F |

Table 2: Significant Sex Differences Unique to Married Sample

| Variable | Group Favored* |
|---|---|
| Enjoy satisfying meals | M |
| Drive a car | M |
| Have driver's license | M |
| Use friends' transportation | (F) |
| Use relatives' transportation | (F) |
| Need transportation to visit friends | M |
| Would need transportation to classes | M |
| Believe others think taking classes is silly | M |
| Present employment | (M) |
| Want a job | (M) |
| Want a full-time job | (M) |
| Volunteer work | F |

*Parentheses in this and subsequent tables indicate an alternative interpretation is possible

Table 3: Significant Sex Differences Unique to Widowed Sample

| Variable | Group Favored |
|---|---|
| Change in eating habits with aging | F |
| Eat wholesome meals | F |
| Believe information on food preparation would help | F |
| Believe assistance in preparing food would help | F |
| Believe better appetite would help | (F) |
| Need laundry help | F |
| Need yard help | M |
| Need help with meal preparation | F |
| Need weekly cleaning help | F |
| Ability to get medical appointments | F |
| Have as much pep as last year | M |
| Believe it was better in the old days | F |
| Want a confidant | (F) |
| Desire to discuss widowhood | (F) |
| Desire to discuss death | (F) |
| Desire to take a class | F |
| Would feel out of place in class | F |
| Feel too old to learn | F |
| Hearing impairment would interfere with class | F |
| Classes are too costly | F |
| Age perception | M |
| Distance from school | F |
| Evaluation of religious services | F |
| Evaluation of psychological services | F |
| Evaluation of housing arrangements | F |
| Evaluation of financial advisement | F |
| Loneliness | F |
| Satisfaction with life | F |
| Morale | F |

Table 4: Results of Partial Correlation Analysis for Widowed Sample

| Additional Significant Sex Differences | Group Favored |
|---|---|
| Happy as when younger | M |
| Belong to organization for elderly | F |
| Need transportation to meetings | M |
| Use relatives' transportation | M |
| Distance from church | F |
| Believe classes are too costly | F |
| Desire to discuss retirement | (M) |
| Desire for personal insight | (F) |
| Desire to discuss public protection | (F) |

| Loss of Significant Sex Difference |
|---|
| Morale |
| Loneliness |
| Satisfaction with life |
| Feel too old to learn |
| Believe better appetite would help |

Table 5: Results of Partial Correlation Analysis for Married Sample

| Additional Significant Sex Differences | Group Favored |
|---|---|
| Need laundry help | M |
| Need help with meal preparation | M |
| Ability to get medical appointments | M |
| Need transportation to medical services | M |
| Use organizational transportation | F |
| Need transportation to shopping | M |
| Use own car | M |
| Have a lot to be sad about | M |
| Desire to discuss widowhood | (F) |

Loss of Significant Sex Difference

Believe nutritional information would help